

ART. III.—*An Account of the Engwurra or Fire Ceremony of Certain Central Australian Tribes.*

By PROFESSOR BALDWIN SPENCER, M.A.,

AND

F. J. GILLEN,

Special Magistrate and Sub-Protector of Aborigines, Alice Springs.

[Read 8th April, 1897.]

(ABSTRACT).

Amongst certain Central Australian tribes the last of the initiatory rites through which a man must pass before he is admitted to full membership takes the form of what may be called a series of ordeals by fire.

Such a fire ordeal has not hitherto been described so far as we are aware amongst Australian natives, and, during the recent summer, the authors had the opportunity of witnessing the Engwurra ceremony as enacted by the natives of the Arunta tribe living in the Macdonnell Ranges in the centre of the continent. Similar ceremonies are known to the authors as occurring in other tribes, such as the Iparra and Warramunga, whilst a slightly different one called the Wilyaru occurs amongst the Urrabunna tribe. Of considerably greater importance however than that referring to the fire ceremonies themselves, which only occupied a comparatively short time, was the information which the authors were enabled to collect with regard to the organisation of the tribe in respect to the existence and curious arrangement of the totems, and also in regard to the meaning and significance of the churinga or sacred sticks and stones of the natives.

Before entering into details it is necessary to refer briefly to the organisation of two tribes which may be taken as typical examples, one in which descent is counted in the female and the other in the male line.

Of the former we may take the Urrabunna, living to the west of Lake Eyre, as an example. In this the whole tribe is divided into two exogamous intermarrying divisions, each of which we will speak of as a phratry. One of these is called Matthurrie and the other Kirarawa. A Matthurrie man must marry a Kirarawa woman, and his children are Kirarawa, that is, they belong to the mother's moiety. In addition to the phratry name, each individual bears a totem name, that is, he or she is a member of a group of individuals—the whole group being distributed in various localities over the district occupied by the tribe—who are supposed to be especially associated with some animal or plant, the name of which they bear. Each of these groups is called by the natives a Thunthunnie, and no man or woman may eat the animal or plant associated with his or her own totem or Thunthunnie. Further still, there are particular totems restricted to the two phratries, and by means of them further restrictions are placed upon marriage—a Matthurrie man of one totem having to marry a Kirarawa woman of another totem. A few of these and the marriage relationship is shown in the following table:—

Man.		Woman.		Children are	
Phratry.	Totem.	Phratry.	Totem.	Phratry.	Totem.
Matthurrie	Cicada, marries,	Kirarawa	Crow,	Kirarawa	Crow.
„	Dingo „	„	Waterhen	„	Waterhen.
„	Emu „	„	Rat	„	Rat.
„	Swan „	„	Pelican	„	Pelican.

This shows at once that both as regards phratry and totem the children follow the mother.

Taking now the Arunta tribe<sup>1</sup> we may describe its organisation in outline as follows. There are four subphratries so coupled together as to give clear evidence of the former existence of two main phratries. These four subphratries are called Panunga and Bultharra, Purula and Kumarra. Panunga and Bultharra represent one moiety or phratry, Purula and Kumarra the other. Further reference will be made to this point later on. We can tabulate the marriage arrangements as follows:

<sup>1</sup> The Urrabunna tribe is practically identical in organisation with that described by Mr. Howitt as occurring in the adjoining Dieri tribe, and the organisation of the Arunta tribe has already been, to a certain extent, described by Messrs. Fison, Howitt, Stirling, and Gillen.

Man.		Woman.	Children are
Panunga	marries	Purula - -	Bultharra.
Bultharra	,,	Kumarra -	Panunga.
Purula	,,	Panunga -	Kumarra.
Kumarra	,,	Bultharra -	Purula.

In other words a man must marry a woman belonging to the moiety of the tribe to which he does not belong, and his children belong to his own moiety, but to the other division of it.

As we have said, this is the arrangement in mere outline, practically conditions are more complicated. For example, not all Panunga women are eligible as wives to each and every Panunga man. To a Panunga man the Purula women are divided into two groups (and *vice versa* if we speak of a Panunga woman), which are called respectively Ipmunna and Unawa, and it is only the latter who are eligible to him as wives, and who are called his tribal unawas, or wives, though he only actually marries a limited number. In this way it will be seen that each sub-phratry is subdivided into two groups, so that as a matter of fact we actually get eight and not four divisions, and each one of these eight has in the northern part of the tribe a distinct name, four others, viz., Uknaria, Appungerta, Ungalla and Umbitchana being added to those already mentioned. The original Panunga is now divided into Panunga and Uknaria, the Bultharra into Bultharra and Appungerta, the Purula into Purula and Ungalla, and the Kumarra into Kumarra and Umbitchana. With this further division, while matters are, to a certain extent, complicated, yet in other ways they are simplified. In the southern part of the tribe all the women belonging to the division, into which say a Panunga man must marry, are called Purula; in the northern half of the tribe, half of the original Purula retain the old name, the other half have acquired<sup>1</sup> a new name, viz., Ungalla. In the same way the Panunga has been divided into Panunga and Uknarria. A Panunga must now marry a Purula (that is, a woman belonging to only one-half of the original group of the same name) and an Uknarria marries an Ungalla.

---

<sup>1</sup> This division into eight has been gradually adopted from the Ilparra tribe, which inhabits the district immediately to the north of the Arunta. At the present time the division into eight is slowly spreading southwards through the Arunta.

So far as the phratry is concerned the matter of descent is comparatively simple—the child goes into that of its father—but, in the case of the totem, it is at first sight most perplexing. You may, for example, examine first a family in which the father is a witchetty grub and the mother a wild cat, and you may find that, supposing there are two children, both of them are witchetty grubs. In the next family examined, perhaps, both parents will be witchetty grubs, and out of two children one may belong to the same totem and the other may be a wild cat, and so on, the totem names being apparently mixed up in the greatest confusion possible.

The following table gives the actual totem name of two families, selected at random, who are now living amongst the Arunta in the northern part of the tribe, and may be taken as accurately representative of the totem names found in various families throughout the tribe. Of course the names vary much from family to family, and in various parts of the country, certain totems predominating in some parts and others in other parts. You may, perhaps, for example find yourself in one district of more or less limited area and find one particular totem largely represented: travelling out of this district you may find that special totem but seldom present until you come into another and perhaps distant part—it may be forty or fifty miles away—when again it becomes the principal totem. The reason for, or rather the explanation given by the natives of, this curious local distribution of the totems will be seen subsequently.

*Family 1.*—Father, little hawk. Wife No. 1, bandicoot; daughter, witchetty grub. Wife No. 2, kangaroo; no children. Wife No. 3, lizard; two daughters, one emu, the other water.

*Family 2.*—Father, witchetty grub. Wife No. 1, lizard; no children. Wife No. 2, Hakea flower; four sons, respectively, witchetty grub, emu, eagle-hawk, Arrakurta; two daughters, each witchetty grub.

Taking these<sup>1</sup> as typical examples, it will be seen that the question of totem has nothing to do with marriage so far as either making it obligatory on a man of one totem to marry a woman of another, or so far as the totems of their children are directly concerned.

---

<sup>1</sup> These are only two out of very many examined by the authors.

In their curious totem regulations the Arunta, Luritcha and Ilparra tribes agree, as the authors know from personal observation, whilst they have strong reason to believe that large and important tribes living to the north are in accord with them on all important points. These tribes are the Warramunga, Waagai, Illeowra, and Wickliffe.

It was whilst watching and questioning closely the natives during the performance of the Engwurra ceremony that the authors were able to find out the way in which the totem names of the individuals originate.

The total period occupied by the Engwurra was more than four months. It was held near to Alice Springs and was attended by representatives from various parts of the tribe, some of whom travelled a distance of about two hundred miles to be present. The men were summoned by messengers bearing the sacred churinga, and about the middle of September they began to assemble. A special level piece of ground, somewhat triangular in shape, bounded on one side by a river with its belt of timber, and on another by a range of rugged quartzite hills, and on a third by low scrub, was selected as the spot for the Engwurra ground. The main encampment to which the women and children went was fixed on the opposite side of the river so that no females or uninitiated males could see what was taking place in the Engwurra ground. The component groups of the camp could be distinguished by the spots on which they built their wurlies, those who came from the south erecting them on the south of the ground, those from the north on the north side and so on. Each party which came in brought with it a larger or smaller number of the sacred sticks and stones which are called churinga.

We have already referred to the division of the tribe into two moieties, one consisting of the Panunga and Bultharra men, and the other of the Purula and Kumarra, and in connection with the storing of the churinga on the Engwurra ground this fact was brought out very prominently. All those belonging to the Panunga and Bultharra were placed on a special platform made in the branches of a mulga tree on the range bounding the southern end of the ground, while those of the Kumarra and Purula were placed on a small platform at the northern end of the ground.

In speaking of one another also, men of the two moieties use different words to describe their own and the other moiety. For example, if you are speaking to a Panunga man he will refer to the Kumarra and Purula as being *Mūlyanūka*, and to the Panunga and Bultharra as *Nākrākia*. In just the same way a Kumarra man will call his own moiety *Nākrākia* and the other *Mūlyanūka*.

The evenings of the first three weeks were occupied by the performance of two ordinary corroborees at which all members of the camp, women and children included, were allowed to be present. Before these were concluded the leader of the Engwurra went down to the ground where the ceremonies were to be performed (the ordinary corroboree ground being some distance away) and here he made a long low mound of earth about forty feet in length, two in width, and one in height, and ornamented the top with small boughs of Eucalyptus. This was called the Parra and apparently is meant to represent a tract of country. By its side the great majority of the ceremonies were enacted. At the end of the three weeks the men who were to be finally initiated, together with the older men, separated themselves from the women who remained in the main camp, and lived on or close by the Engwurra ground for nearly three months. During this period there was a constant succession of sacred ceremonies, all of which were concerned with the totems.

The idea of the whole ceremony was evidently first to test the powers of endurance of the younger men who had implicitly to obey the directions of the older men and secondly to impart to them the sacred secrets of the tribe concerned with the totems and the churinga.

Without going into details it may be said that each of the very numerous separate ceremonies was concerned with a particular totem and further with a totem associated with a particular spot. The native name for these sacred ceremonies is Quabarra<sup>1</sup> and the names of a few will serve as illustrations of the long series. There was for example the Quabarra Unjeamba of Ooroominna which means a ceremony of the Unjeamba or Hakea flower totem of a place called Ooroominna; the Quabarra

---

<sup>1</sup> The ordinary corroboree is called "Altherta" by the Arunta people.

Achilpa of Urapitchera which means a ceremony of the "wild cat"<sup>1</sup> totem of Urapitchera, a place on the Finke River; the Quabarra Okirra of Idracowra which means a ceremony of the kangaroo totem of Idracowra, a place on the Finke River, and the Quabarra Unchichera of Imanda, which means a ceremony of the frog totem of a place called Imanda or the Bad Crossing on the Hugh River.

In this way each ceremony was concerned with some particular totem and not only this but with a totem or rather a special division of a totem of some particular locality, and further still, each ceremony was owned and presided over by some old man, usually, but not always, of the totem and locality with which it was concerned.

By means of enquiring carefully after each performance as to what it represented, the authors were able to gather together a large series of notes relating to the traditions of the tribes in regard to the totems, but, for the present purpose, the following brief outline of the myths or traditions which have sprung up to account for the curious totemic system of the tribe will suffice.

All the ceremonies were concerned with certain mythical ancestors who lived in what the natives call the "alcheringa" or dream times. These ancestors are so intimately associated in the native mind with the animals or plants whose name they bore that an alcheringa man of, say the kangaroo totem, may be spoken of either as a man-kangaroo or as a kangaroo-man. The identity of the human individual appears to be sunk in that of the object with which he is associated and from which he is supposed to have originated.

These alcheringa men and women are represented as collected together in companies, each one of which consisted of a certain number of individuals. The members of each company were of the same totem and belonged to the same moiety of the tribe, that is they were either Purula and Kumarra, or Panunga and Bultharra. In the alcheringa, for example, we meet with traditions referring to several groups of "wild cat" men, most of them composed of Purula and Kumarra but some of Panunga and Bultharra, the kangaroo men seem to have been Purula and

---

<sup>1</sup> i.e., *Dasyurus geoffroyi*.



Kumarra, and the witchetty grub men Panunga and Bultharra. At the present day no totem is confined to one moiety of the tribe, but in each "local centre" of a totem we always find a great predominance of members belonging to one half, as for example at Alice Springs, the most important centre of the witchetty grub totem, where amongst a large number of Panunga and Bultharra men there are a few Purula and Kumarra.

These alcheringa ancestors are represented in tradition, some of them as originating and staying in certain places, such as the witchetty grubs at Alice Springs, others such as the wild cat groups are represented as wandering about over the country in various directions, but along certain definite lines, the route of which is accurately preserved in tradition.

Every alcheringa man and woman carried about a large number of the sacred churinga,<sup>1</sup> the meaning and significance of which has not previously been known. At certain camping places as the alcheringa ancestors travelled on, or at spots where they originated, certain individuals are represented as having gone into the ground and as having been transformed into sacred churinga. Certain also of the latter were placed in the ground at these camping places.

Each churinga is inseparably associated with a spirit individual—in the case of the individuals who turned into them, the name is even preserved—and so we find at the present day that the whole country occupied by the Arunta is dotted over with numerous spots at each of which numbers of sacred churinga are buried, each of which is associated with a spirit individual. In this way there have been formed what the natives call *ōknānikilla*, that is spots, each of which is, as it were, inhabited by spirit individuals the totem of whom is of course that of the alcheringa individual whom they represent or who carried the churinga with which each one is associated. These *oknanikilla* may hence be appropriately termed *local totem centres*, and if we take one alcheringa group of ancestors such as the wild cat for

---

<sup>1</sup> The form of these, some of which have been figured and described by various writers such as Messrs. Stirling, Gillen, Etheridge, etc., are well illustrated in the Report of the Horn Expedition, vol. iv., pl. 7. Their use as sacred objects has been described by writers such as Messrs. Howitt, Fison and Gillen. They are of the nature of the "bulloarer," the use and importance of which was first pointed out in Australia by Mr. Howitt.



example, it will now be seen that we have over the country and also, it must be remembered, in spots well known to the natives, groups of wild cat spirit individuals.

When a woman conceives it is supposed that it is one of such a group of spirits who goes inside her and thus it naturally follows, granting the premises firmly believed in by the natives, that the totem of the child is determined solely by the spot at which the mother conceived, or, what is the same thing, believes that she conceived, the child. A single example of one of numerous actual instances known to the authors must suffice to illustrate the actual usage. Not long ago a witchetty grub woman, living at Alice Springs, her husband belonging to the same totem, went on a visit to a neighbouring emu group, here she conceived, and the child, afterwards born in a witchetty grub locality at Alice Springs, belongs to the emu totem; it *must* do, the natives say, because it entered her in an emu locality; had it entered the mother at Alice Springs it would as inevitably have been born a witchetty grub.

Not only is this so, but every spirit-child, when entering a woman, is supposed to drop the churinga which until then it always carries about. After the child's birth the father and one or two old men, having learnt from the mother where conception took place, actually go in search of the churinga. They either find one, or if they do not, then they manufacture one out of the mulga or other hard wood tree which lies nearest to the spot. At the latter there is usually some gum tree or prominent natural object, such as a rock, which the spirit-child has been supposed to specially inhabit, and this is spoken of as its *nānja* tree or stone. During the life of the human individual who is its reincarnation this is his *nanja* tree or stone and the churinga is his churinga *nanja*.

Each local group of a totem has a sacred store-house, such as a cleft in some more or less inaccessible spot in a rough range, and here, under the custody of the head man, or *alärtunja*, of the group, all the churinga are kept. No woman or uninitiated man goes near this sacred store-house, or *erntätülŋga*, under penalty of death.

Such, in brief outline, is the totemic system of the Arunta, Iparra, and Luritcha tribes, and as before said the same probably applies with slight variations to tribes further north.

The greater part of the Engwurra was occupied with performing these sacred ceremonies of the totems, whereby a knowledge of the doings of the alcheringa ancestors was communicated to the younger men, and the sacred churinga some of which belonged to them, others to more recent ancestors and others to still living individuals, were carefully examined and explained.

After about three months, during which time the younger men had been living mainly in the Engwurra camp, an important change in the proceedings took place. The young men were, in parties of three and four, put under the charge of certain of the older men who had already been through the ceremony and received collectively the name of *Ilpongwurra*, a word which implies an absence of certain forms of decoration, such as grease, and had their foreheads and the hole through the nasal septum decorated with twigs of a particular species of *Eremophila*. Between each young man and the elder man in charge of him the relationship of *Apmūrra* was established, that is, the young man might not speak to, or in the presence of, the older one.

Daily, just at sunrise, the *Ilpongwurra* were sent in a body out of the Engwurra camp under charge of two or three old men and to the accompaniment of the loud whirring and booming of churinga or bullroarers. It was now their duty to remain out in the bush securing food for the old men, to whom it was brought in at night time.

Now also began the fire ordeals which were of three forms. The first took place in the main women's camp at sunrise or sunset or both. All the Bultharra and Panunga women in one spot and all the Purula and Kumarra in another, gathered together and, each party having made a fire, awaited the approach of the *Ilpongwurra*, who were driven towards them in a body by older men, protecting themselves as well as they could with shields and boughs of *Eremophila* from the burning grass and boughs which the women threw over their heads.

After having been thus treated by each group of women separately, the *Ilpongwurra* turned and fled to the Engwurra camp, near to which the women, of course, dare not come.

The second fire ordeal took place out in the bush, and was repeated on two separate days. The older men made a large hot

fire in a secluded spot amongst the ranges, and having placed green boughs on the red-hot embers made the young men lie down upon it, each one for perhaps three or four minutes, in the stifling smoke and heat. This was undoubtedly, as the authors can testify after trying the heat of the fire, at all events a very unpleasant and rather severe ordeal.

The third was less severe and will be described shortly.

While the Ilpongwurra were out of camp the old men still went on performing ceremonies, reserving many of them, however, for night-time, when, specially towards the end, there was little rest to be had. Singing and ceremonies went on with little intermission, often till two or three o'clock in the morning. The ceremonies, though it is not necessary to describe them here, were, it must be remembered, such as required elaborate preparation in the way of decorating the performers, and often occupied in this way from three to six hours.

Two days before the last ceremony was performed, under the direction of the old man who had been in supreme charge throughout, a small gum tree about twenty feet in height was cut down and carried into camp. After being smeared all over with human blood and having had the upper end decorated with a tuft of eagle-hawk feathers, a chilarra or head-band worn across the forehead by natives and a nose-bone, it was fixed upright in the ground close to the Parra. On the last night all the Ilpongwurra were brought in and after having lain for two or three hours in a long line and in perfect silence, with each man's head upon the Parra (this they did every night during the last two weeks), they got up, and a number of small fires were made round the base of the pole. The latter was called the Kau-ua and is the most important and sacred ceremonial object of the tribe. The whole of the night was spent in painting the backs of the Ilpongwurra with various designs characteristic of different totems, but the painting on each man had no relationship of necessity to his own totem, and was always done by the old man to whom he was apmurra.

In the women's camp two large shallow holes were dug out, each about two feet deep, and in these—by the Panunga and Bultharra in one and by the Kumarra and Purula in the other—fires were made.

Just before sunrise the decoration of the Ilpongwurra was complete, and in single file they passed across the river out from the Engwurra ground on to the women's camp, and halted about fifty yards from the fires, behind which the women stood moving their hands up and down as if to invite the men on.

Then each old man led his apmurra men up to the fires, on which they were placed in a kneeling position by the women. The Bultharra and Panunga women put the Kumarra and Purula men on and *vice versa*. In a short time it was all over, and turning back, the Ilpongwurra, now transformed into Erliāra, or fully initiated natives, returned to the Engwurra ground.

All that remained now to complete the ceremony was for the ban of silence between the men who were apmurra to each other to be done away with. The younger ones had still to remain out in the bush until they brought in an offering of food to their apmurra. When this was done, and it usually took place after an interval of time varying from one to four weeks, the older man performed some sacred ceremony, at the close of which the mouths of all those present were touched with some sacred object which had been used in the ceremony, and in this way the ban of silence was removed.

---